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Abstract

Traces the spiritual development of Maskull in *A Voyage to Arcturus* and Ransom in *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra*. Focuses on the concept of the “dark night of the soul” endured by both.

Additional Keywords

Dark night of the soul in C.S. Lewis; Dark night of the soul in David Lindsay; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Ransom—Spiritual development; Lewis, C.S. *Out of the Silent Planet*; Lewis, C.S. *Perelandra*; Lindsay, David—Characters—Maskull—Spiritual development; Lindsay, David. *A Voyage to Arcturus*—Sources

Maskull and Ransom: The Dark Night of the Soul

Matt Fisher

In his essay "On Stories," C.S. Lewis wrote "His (David Lindsay's) Tormance is a region of the spirit... To construct plausible and moving 'other worlds' you must draw on the only real 'other world' we know, that of the spirit."¹ Lewis is quick to identify what it is that contributes to the special reputation of *A Voyage to Arcturus*. Perhaps the most fundamental spiritual quest concerns the nature of the individual's relationship to Reality. Both *A Voyage to Arcturus* and Lewis' "Space Trilogy" (which Lewis stated several times was partially inspired by Lindsay's book) reflect this concern. In particular, both of these works can be viewed as portraying the spiritual development and maturation of an individual. By looking at how Lewis and Lindsay each describe this process, we not only get a sense of how the two works are connected, but more importantly we gain an understanding of the dynamics of this quest, particularly in its "Dark Night" aspect. The Dark Night of the Soul, a concept that reoccurs often in various mystical traditions in the world (particularly in the work of St. John of the Cross, where this particular phrase comes from) is that part of the spiritual quest where the soul feels as if it has been cut off from its source, that it is moving across a desert and moving without any illumination as to where it is headed. It is a period of despair and doubt that many maintain is necessary for the eventual accomplishment of the quest. Thomas Merton, the reknowned Trappist monk, writes "The monk confronts his own humanity and that of his world at the deepest and most central point where the void seems to open out into despair."² St. John of the Cross said "And if he be not blinded as to this (the higher and rational part), and remain not in total darkness, he attains not to that which is greater --namely, that which is taught by faith."³

A Voyage to Arcturus

A Voyage to Arcturus starts without a clearly defined quest. Maskull is offered the opportunity to travel to Tormance and experience strange and wondrous adventures. Yet neither Krag or Nightspore give clear answers to Maskull's questions. If they answer at all, they are evasive. Maskull himself isn't sure why he chooses to go, and when he is asked on Tormance why he came, he answers initially "Perhaps I was attracted by curiosity, or perhaps it was the love of adventure."⁴ At the end of the journey, his answer has become "To meet with new experiences, perhaps. The old ones no longer interested me."⁵ Robert Aitken Roshi, a respected American Zen teacher, writes "The roshi (teacher) will ask why you wish to do zazen. This is an important question and you should be prepared in advance to answer it. However, if you have no answer, that is all right. Just say so; that is an answer."⁶ It is acceptable to not have clear reasons for beginning the quest -- it is the action of starting that is important. This ambiguity is maintained throughout the first part of the novel, as Maskull wanders across Tormance trying to build a conceptual framework for understanding this new world. Even Maskull's initial encounter with Surtur is clothed with ambiguity -- why is it necessary for Maskull to serve Surtur? How does one serve him? The answers will be revealed later. For now it is important simply to continue on the journey.

Lindsay was very much influenced by the thought of Arthur Schopenhauer, who was one of the first to put forth the concept that this world is dominated by Will. For Schopenhauer, the only way to provide life with meaning was to learn to control the will. Lindsay took this concept a step farther and believed that by controlling the will, learning to accept pain and thereby developing the quality of endurance, Man could start to transcend this world with all of its vulgarity and sordidness and begin to reach out to the Sublime, that world that is separate and in some ways opposed to ours. Melvin Raff has pointed out a trinity structure that runs through Lindsay's novel --feeling/relation/existence.⁸ This triplet is important in understanding the dynamics of Maskull's quest. Feeling is a stage where our actions are subject to the desires of the will. It is perhaps the coarsest level of living, the farthest removed from the Sublime. Relation is a step higher, but now it becomes important what the relationship is established with. If the object that we relate to is work, money, another person, or indeed anything of this world, we are still trapped by the power of Will. It is when the relationship is established with something that leads us towards the Sublime that relation takes us a step closer to transcending this world. The last stage, existence, is the point at which we are no longer subject to the power of Will, but rather are united with the Sublime in the state that we were intended for. This pattern of thought is not unique to Lindsay; it lies behind Buddhism and the Rule of St. Benedict, to name two examples. The slow progress up this ladder of "sublimity" can be harsh and painful. In the Mumonkan, one of the classic Zen texts, is recorded the story of Gutei, "who raised his finger whenever he was asked a question about Zen. A boy attendant began to imitate him in this way. When anyone asked the boy what his master had preached about, the boy would raise his finger. Gutei heard about the boy's mischief. He seized him and cut off his finger. The boy cried and ran away. Gutei called and stopped him. When the boy turned his head to Gutei, Gutei raised up his own finger. In that instance the boy was enlightened."⁹ That same harshness and pain is present in *A Voyage to Arcturus* with its many deaths and actions that result in pain for others, and it may be one of the aspects that provokes the shock and discomfort that many readers have felt.

How does the concept of the Dark Night fit into this process? As Lindsay depicts the process, the Dark Night comes both at the transition point between two stages, and also becomes more continuously present as one gets closer to the Sublime. After his encounter with Dreamscinter and the accompanying vision, Maskull awakes in the Wombflash Forest in an anxious state, full of questions. It is not clear to him what he must do or where he must go. The only clear thought in his mind is that the journey must continue. This point marks the transition from the feeling state to the state of relation.¹⁰ A similar transition occurs after Sullenbode's death. The difference is that Maskull is unable to see beyond his despair that the journey must continue in order for him to find Muspel. Maskull's death is the only way that he can overcome this Dark Night and continue as Nightspore. Neither of these major transitions, along with many other

smaller changes, occur in an atmosphere of optimism or triumph.

The continuous aspect of the Dark Night unfolds from the time that Maskull sets foot on Tormance. The first three days are spent under the domination of other wills. Again, the encounter with Dreamscinter changes things. From this point until he meets Gang-net, Maskull will never be quite sure how he is to find Surtur and the source of the Muspel-light. This uncertainty lends a disturbing thread of despair and doubt as each new encounter fails to clearly lead to Muspel. This element of pessimism and doubt is Lindsay's legacy from Schopenhauer; neither man believed that the path that leads to subjugation of the will was easy or joyful. Nightspore's reaction upon realizing the true relationship between Muspel and Crystalman's world is one of despair and doubt. He sees no way that Krag can win. Yet he continues, as all must continue through their own Dark Night if they are to truly give meaning to their lives.

Out of the Silent Planet & Perelandra

C.S. Lewis did not intend either of these two novels to be modern day retellings of *A Pilgrim's Progress*. *Out of the Silent Planet* was intended to challenge the idea that Man is destined to rule all of the planets, and *Perelandra* started out as a story about floating islands that evolved into a story of the Fall. Yet both of these books describe a process of transformation that results in a different and stronger relationship between Ransom and God.

In the opening of *Out of the Silent Planet*, Ransom is initially described as the "Pedestrian" and comes across as a very ordinary, if a bit solitary, man. What a difference from the first impression that the reader has of Maskull! There is no sense of being in the presence of a giant, a man almost larger than life. Ransom is not tempted with the opportunity to see wondrous sights — he is abducted by two individuals who plan to use him as a sacrifice to the powers of Mars. Yet the kidnapping of Ransom will lead to the eventual development of the man who will help avert the Fall on Perelandra and serve as the spiritual leader of Logres. What Lewis is describing here is not the effort initiated by man to become divine, but rather the action of God breaking into the individual's life and inviting that person to participate in a unique relationship with the Holy. In *Perelandra*, the opening has both elements of despair and joy in it. Ransom's friend experiences doubt and fear both on the road to Ransom's house (which although amplified by demonic forces are still initially present in him) and also in the presence of an eldill. He is at the same level that Ransom was at in the beginning of *Out of the Silent Planet*. Compare this with Ransom, who has complete faith in the eldill's mission. What Lewis is describing is the beginning of an individual relying less on his own powers and abilities and trusting more in Divine Providence. This complete dependence on God has been a hallmark of those that the Church has hailed as saints over the centuries.

Jeannette Hume Lutton has described Ransom's journey to Malacandra as an experience that is focused around Reason, while his later journey to Perelandra is an experience centered around Revelation.¹ Lewis may have patterned this after his own two part conversion experience. In *Surprised by Joy* he indicates that he came to accept the existence of Deity as a logical outcome of his search for meaning, while the acceptance of the divinity of Christ was a

decision based more on intuition and less on rational thought. Even though the two stages may have different foundations, it is noteworthy that Lewis describes a similar pattern of movement from solitude to communion. It is in this process that we find the elements of despair and doubt that mark the Dark Night stage. After his arrival on Malacandra and escape from Weston and Devine, Ransom wanders on the planet, alone and afraid of what may surround him. His imagination torments him with visions of bug-eyed monsters and he has no clear way to return back to Earth. The encounter with the hrossa and his eventual acceptance by the hrossa community marks the end of his solitude and the diminishment of his fears. As Lutton points out, Ransom has been incorporated into the community of hnau. But in addition, in his mind there is a greater awareness and appreciation of the wonder and diversity of the Creation. Man is no longer the sole center of the universe.

In *Perelandra*, Ransom's period of despair and doubt come when he realizes the magnitude of what is occurring. He tries to understand why he was chosen, how he is to defeat the Un-man, but there are no simple and easy answers. He is alone on a strange world, asked to do something that he feels is beyond his powers. It is here that Lewis provides us with a moving example of grace at work. Ransom realizes several things, none of them by logic but rather by Divine guidance. He is not alone, for Maleldil is in some way with him. If Ransom fails, Maleldil will redeem Perelandra in some other manner. As for dealing with the Un-man, the solution is simply to engage in physical combat to the death. It is interesting to note that as soon as Ransom comes to this revelation, his anxiety disappears. What is important is that having crossed this desert, Ransom then directly experiences the presence of Maleldil the Younger. Lewis has given us a picture of the result of relying not on our own egos, but rather submitting ourselves to the will of God. The result is not the elimination of arduous tasks, but rather communion with God that provides us with a sense of peace even in the midst of the turmoil around us.

Conclusion

Why is this Dark Night that appears in both these authors' work thought to be necessary? Thomas Merton writes "the monk faces the worst, and discovers in it the hope of the best. From the darkness comes light. From death, life. From the abyss there comes, unaccountably, the mysterious gift of the Spirit sent by God to make all things new, to transform, to create the redeemed world, and to re-establish all things in Christ."² If one substitutes the Sublime for the concept of God/Christ in the above passage, then one has a statement that might prove to be acceptable to Lindsay. Regardless of the particular framework of thought chosen, it is clear that both Lewis and Lindsay see value and importance in experiencing the Dark Night, in confronting our despair and doubt, in order to be able to pass through to the truth on the other side.

Notes

1. C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, (London: George Bles, 1966), p. 12.
2. Some of the major works are *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, and *The Living Flame of Love*.
3. Thomas Merton, *Contemporary Prayer*, (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1971), p. 25.

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- ²⁴ In a paper read at The Tolkien Workshop in London, 15 May 1987
- ²⁵ Patrick K. Ford Trans. and Ed. *The Mabinogi and other Welsh Tales* (London: University of California Press 1977)
- ²⁶ Evangeline Walton *The Song of Rhiannon* (New York: Ballantine 1972)
- ²⁷ Marilyn E. Hicken (*Cumulated Fiction Index 1975-1979* (England: Association of Assistant Librarians 1980); Marilyn E. Hicken *Cumulated Fiction Index 1980-1984* (England: Association of Assistant Librarians 1985))
- ²⁸ Mary Stewart, *The Crystal Cave* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1970)
- ²⁹ John Glos, *Artorius Rex* (London: Cassell & Co. 1977)
- ³⁰ T.H. White *The Once and Future King* (London: Collins 1958)
- ³¹ Leslie Alcock *Arthur's Britain* (London: Pelican Books 1973)
- ³² Kathleen Herbert, *The Lady of the Fountain* (Frome: Bran's Head 1982)
- ³³ It cannot be coincidence that Finnbogi is also mentioned in Graenlendinga Saga as one of the earlier settlers of Greenland. He is unlikely to be Snorri's father, as he was murdered in his first winter there.
- ³⁴ Jefferson P. Swycaffer, "Historical Motivations for the Siege of Minas Tirith" in *Mythlore* Number 35, page 47; Jessica Yates in *Mythlore* Number 39, page 41

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Companions, who look outside themselves, are made better. Childish Pippin and rustic Sam become heroes. Vulgar Stanz becomes a prop to her gifted, neotenus husband. Jealous little inhuman Tinker Bell shows herism when she drinks Hook's poison.

Our villains claim to be poisoned by the Other, but they aren't. Each is overdoed to death with himself.

Notes

- ¹ Not far-fetched: historically, that Mass was commissioned by someone who wanted to steal the credit, though it wasn't Salieri.
- ² J.M. Barrie, *Peter and Wendy* (New York, Scribner's, 1926), p. 72. Further quotations from this book will be identified in the text with PW and the page number.
- ³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York, Ballantine, 1965), p. 93. All Tolkien quotations will be from the Ballantine paperbacks, identified by page number and II (*The Hobbit*), II (*The Two Towers*), and III (*The Return of the King*).
- ⁴ This line is from the screenplay, no printed text of *Amadeus*. Most quotations are from *The Collected Plays of Peter Shaffer* (New York, Harmony, 1982), identified with S and their page number.
- ⁵ J.M. Barrie, *Collected Plays*, p. 84.
- ⁶ This is before Sam borne the Ring; it will become vital that before the end, he too is akin in this respect (see below, pity).
- ⁷ *The Screwtape Letters* (New York, Macmillan, 1967), p. ix.
- ⁸ Shaffer can do even worse in respect of having no fun: Mark Askalon in *Shrivings*.
- ⁹ This line is only in the acting script (New York, Samuel French, 1981), p. 113.

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- ⁴ St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II, iv, 2, quoted in Merton, op. cit., p. 80.
- ⁵ David Lindsay, *A Voyage to Arcturus*, (Secaucus, Citadel Press, 1985), p. 48. All text quotations are from this edition.
- ⁶ *A Voyage to Arcturus*, p. 218.
- ⁷ Robert Aitken, *Taking the Path of Zen*, (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982), pp. 92-3.
- ⁸ Melvin Raff, "The Structure of *A Voyage to Arcturus*" in *Studies in Scottish Literature*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1980), Vol. XV, pp. 262-67.
- ⁹ Paul Reps, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1957), p. 92-3.
- ¹⁰ Raff, op. cit., p. 264.
- ¹¹ Jeanette Hume Lutton, "The Feast of Reason", *Mythlore*, Whole #47 (Autumn 1986), p. 37-41.
- ¹² Merton, op. cit., p. 25.

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